

Fighting Segregation, Threats, and Dynamite: Rabbi William B. Silverman's Nashville Battle

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*"A rabbi they don't want to drive out of town is no rabbi.
And a rabbi who lets himself be driven out is no man."
—Rabbi Israel Salanter¹*



Rabbi William B. Silverman
(Courtesy American Jewish Archives)

On 16 March 1958, the Nashville Jewish Community Center was dynamited by a group calling itself the Confederate Underground. As a public response, Rabbi William B. Silverman (1913–2001), of Nashville's The Temple Congregation Ohabai Sholom, delivered a sermon on a Sabbath eve in the days following the attack. This previously unpublished sermon,² "We Will Not Yield," captures the struggles and deliberations of a young rabbi who, with the support of his congregation but under enormous communal pressures, sought to live by the ideals of his faith.

The sermon is of particular historical note given the timeliness of the message (following so soon after the Nashville bombing), the referencing of contemporaneous events, the expression of the rabbi's own personal response to the crisis, and the example it presents of the use of biblical and, especially, prophetic texts, in making the argument for the rabbi's opposition to segregation. Silverman adopted this outspoken stance despite the dangers that he, his family, and his congregation faced. In this carefully crafted sermon, he defends his support for the integration of Nashville's schools on the grounds of both biblical precedent and Reform Jewish principle. Like other southern rabbis who spoke out against segregation and in favor of civil rights, he based his ideas of social justice upon his interpretation of Jewish tradition.³ He refutes the premise that outspoken support for civil rights will bring harm to the Jewish community, and he places the events in Nashville within the historic context of the fight for integration. Finally, he offers his congregation concrete opportunities for ongoing response.

More than a decade prior to the Nashville bombing, the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) had called for its membership to become involved in matters of civil rights and racial justice. In 1945, the CCAR's Commission

on Justice and Peace reported with pride the work of the conference's membership in matters of race relations and expressed its support for congressional bills regarding fair employment practices. "We reject," the commission reported, "with utter contempt the demagogic warnings to Jews that they keep hands off this issue.... [T]he oppressed groups of our country and of the world can depend on the rabbinate of America, who steeped in prophetic idealism and moved by the word of God, will not abandon them, but will champion their cause until justice is established, peace reigns and the right is set in the earth."⁴

The publication of Silverman's sermonic response to the bombing of the Nashville Jewish center serves to shed further light on the historic role the southern rabbinate played during this contentious period in American history. Silverman's contribution to the cause of civil rights and the process of integration has been noted previously alongside that of other southern rabbis. His willingness to speak out forcefully in favor of school integration was not completely unique in his era. In prior years, Rabbi William Fineshriber had led a campaign in Memphis from the pulpit and in the press against the activities of the Ku Klux Klan and later continued to articulate a plea for social justice for African-Americans, for the poor, and for war veterans. Rabbi Samuel Teitelbaum supported integration in Arkansas, much to the dismay of his own congregants. And Silverman's leadership echoed the activities of colleagues such as rabbis Jacob Rothschild in Atlanta; Julian Feibelman in New Orleans; Emmet Frank in Alexandria, Virginia; Alfred Goodman in Columbus, Georgia; Malcolm Stern in Norfolk, Virginia; Allan Tarshish in Charleston, South Carolina; James Wax in Memphis; Louis Youngerman in Savannah; Ira E. Sanders in Little Rock; and, especially, Charles Mantinband in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, and Perry Nussbaum in Jackson, Mississippi.⁵ Like Silverman, these activist rabbis fought their battles against segregation and racism on multiple fronts: in the press, through communal activism, and, clearly, within the confines of their own congregations as well.

But the outspokenness of these rabbis seems to be the exception to a general hesitancy on the part of most southern rabbis to avoid entering the civil rights fracas. Many preferred instead to espouse the more moderate views of their synagogue membership.⁶ Northern rabbis were much more forthright on behalf of civil rights for African-Americans, while southern rabbis tended to be more cautious in their public pronouncements, including from their own pulpits. As Mark Bauman writes, "To stand up, the rabbis required self-confidence, moral fervor, and determination.... Many 'quiet voices' spoke, more of whom deserve to be heard through future research."⁷ The publication of Silverman's sermon, therefore, adds another such "quiet voice"—albeit one that was hardly "quiet"—to the story of southern Jewry and the desegregation effort.

William B. Silverman was born in 1913 in Altoona, Pennsylvania, the birthplace of both of his parents. He was ordained by the Hebrew Union College



The Temple Congregation Ohabai Sholom
(Courtesy American Jewish Archives)

in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1941, having served as president of the student body during his senior year. Silverman served his first congregation in Battle Creek, Michigan (1941–1943), during which time he was also civilian chaplain at Fort Custer. In Gastonia, North Carolina, where he served next for three years, he established a reputation in his community and beyond as a representative and interpreter of Judaism to Christian audiences and as an enthusiastic spokesman for Zionism. He later took a pulpit in Duluth, Minnesota (1946–1950), during which time he was appointed to the Minnesota Governor’s Advisory Council on Youth Conservation and chaired that body’s Committee on Parents and the Family. Northland College in nearby Ashland, Wisconsin, conferred an honorary doctor of divinity degree on Silverman in 1960 in recognition of his promotion of Christian-Jewish understanding and his “great influence for good”⁸ in civic affairs. From 1950 until 1960, Silverman led Ohabai Sholom of Nashville, Tennessee, one of the oldest and most prominent Reform congregations in the South. As he concluded his decade of service there, the *Nashville Observer* commented editorially that the rabbi’s “religious statesmanship and wisdom” and his “almost solitary” stand against bigotry and violence would fill “a goodly chapter” in the history of Tennessee’s capital city.⁹

As his career progressed, Silverman remained a passionate voice from the pulpit, on radio, and in the press supporting the causes of desegregation, fair housing, and social justice. He would continue his dynamic leadership upon assuming the pulpit of Temple B’nai Jehudah in Kansas City, following in the footsteps of the esteemed Rabbi Samuel Mayerberg, who had himself established a reputation as a fearless advocate for justice and adversary of civic and corporate corruption.

This sermon may be viewed as a continuation of Silverman's fearlessly confrontational messages in support of social justice and civil rights. For instance, in 1952, two years after he began his service as the rabbi of Ohabai Shalom in Nashville, he became involved in a battle for civil liberties that exploded in the community when the American Legion and other groups determined to eliminate so-called subversive textbooks from the schools and "radical" books from the public libraries. Silverman initiated a campaign to fight book burnings and "witch hunts." Through his radio programs, he mobilized the community to express confidence in its public school teachers and reject the climate of guilt by accusation and reactionary suspicion. The Textbook Commission, after a careful inquiry, could find no subversive textbooks, declared confidence in the teachers, and the witch hunt came to an end. Silverman's view that the charges of subversive influence in the schools were baseless was confirmed by a resolution of Tennessee's House of Representatives, which lauded the rabbi for his leadership in combating civic hysteria.¹⁰

It was soon thereafter that a more violent and threatening period began in Silverman's career as an outspoken advocate for civil rights. In his own words of reminiscence:

Telephone calls to the rabbi's house included further threats against a Federal Judge, the synagogue, the Rabbi's family, and the Rabbi himself. Rabbi Silverman received dozens of letters of support from rabbinical colleagues, Christian clergy, community leaders, classmates and friends in the aftermath of these events, including offers of safe haven out of state should he so desire.¹¹

Rabbi Silverman wrote:

I have been called a nigger-lover. This is true. I love Negroes and those who are yellow, brown and white. Isn't this what religion teaches? Isn't this the meaning of the prophet's plea: 'Have we not all one Father? Hath not one God created us? Why then do we deal treacherously every man against his brother?'¹² The Negro is my brother, a child of God, created in the divine image. Judaism and Christianity must take a stand for moral principle, for human rights and dignity, or be labeled a pious fraud. What is at stake is not whether our public school will be integrated. The question is: To what extent are we going to activate the principles of democracy and the American way of life? To what extent are we going to live by our faith?¹³

Silverman's reputation for community involvement and unwavering support for civil rights earned him the admiration of his colleagues, including Rabbi Samuel Mayerberg of Kansas City. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, Rabbi Mayerberg was likewise fully engaged in causes of civil rights and justice in his community.¹⁴ Fittingly, in the Union of American Hebrew Congregations' (UAHC) publication for religious school students, *Keeping Posted*, photographs

of both rabbis appear with the captions “Fighter Silverman” and “Fighter Mayerberg.”¹⁵ In the fall of 1960, Silverman accepted the call to the pulpit of Kansas City’s Congregation B’nai Jehudah as Rabbi Mayerberg’s successor.¹⁶

Soon thereafter (1965–1966), Silverman would continue to address the urgency of ethics and social action in Reform Judaism. Both from the pulpit and through his position as president of the Greater Kansas City Council on Religion and Race, he helped to galvanize the fair housing campaign throughout the metropolitan area. This time the rabbi’s efforts were roundly supported by his lay leadership, including the temple Board of Trustees, the Sisterhood, and the Social Justice Committee. A “Fair Housing Sabbath” held at the temple included civic leaders and Christian ministers, and a door-to-door campaign solicitation in white neighborhoods took place on two weekends in March of 1966. As a result, the city council enacted fair housing legislation for the first time in 1967.¹⁷

In his book, *Basic Reform Judaism* (1970), Silverman would return to his themes of social justice and prophetic Judaism explicitly and forcefully:

To Reform Judaism there can be no religion and particularly no Judaism without ethics. Man’s essential way of serving God is through righteousness. Reform Jews are expected to recognize that religion is related to life and must therefore practice their religious ideals in every facet of their lives whether it is convenient or inconvenient; comfortable or uncomfortable; fashionable or unfashionable. Reform Judaism emphasizes that which has always been intrinsic to Judaism, namely, that ritual without ethics is a profanation of God and a profanation of life. Accordingly, Reform Jews are committed to apply the social ethic of the Hebrew prophets to the political, economic and international problems of the time. The emphasis in Reform Judaism has been on the teachings of the prophets who insisted that God is the God of all people, and that all men are equal before Him. Our stress has been and is on social justice, righteousness and brotherhood. . . . The devotees of the prophetic faith must mobilize for a religious war against ignorance, bigotry, racial and religious discrimination, poverty, disease, and despair for the purpose of implementing the values and precepts that will enable man to create a moral society that will fulfill the commandments of God.¹⁸

Even to this day, rabbis must weigh the consequences of speaking out publicly on matters of civic and political dispute, realizing that many in the pews consider such topics outside the proper boundaries of the pulpit. When contentious issues arise in the arena of public debate, contemporary rabbis still hear the sentiment expressed to Silverman: “Rabbi, stick to the Bible!” Silverman’s sermon, reproduced in full on the following pages, provides a clear and emphatic response, which may serve to help guide rabbis of current and future generations.

We Will Not Yield

*The Answer of Prophetic Judaism to Violence, Threats and Dynamite
(Isaac Mayer Wise Memorial Sabbath)*¹⁹
March 28, 1958

During the course of the past week, it has been said the rabbi should STICK TO RELIGION, TO JUDAISM AND THE BIBLE!²⁰ On this Shabbos Hagadol, on this Great Sabbath before Passover, on this Sabbath when we memorialize Isaac Mayer Wise, the founder of Reform Judaism in America, on this Sabbath when we consider the implications of the dynamiting of the Nashville Jewish Community Center, the threats against the Rabbi of this Congregation,²¹ against our Temple, our House of God—I propose to follow that advice, and to adhere by text and exposition to religion, to Judaism and to the Bible, in order to determine, not my answer, not the answer of a Rabbi, but the answer of prophetic Judaism to violence, threats and dynamite.²²

Reference has been made TO THE BIBLE. Let us turn for a moment to the Torah portion, assigned for this Sabbath, parasha TZAV, beginning with the 6th chapter of the Book of Leviticus: AND THE LORD SPOKE UNTO MOSES SAYING: COMMAND AARON AND HIS SONS: THIS IS THE LAW OF THE BURNT-OFFERING: IT IS THAT WHICH GOETH UP ON ITS FIREWOOD UPON THE ALTAR ALL NIGHT INTO MORNING.²³ This refers to the Tamid, the burnt offering, the continual sacrifice brought every morning and evening in the name of the community. As the various sacrifices are enumerated, the meal-offering, the guilt offering, the peace offering, it is commanded: A PERPETUAL FIRE SHALL BE KEPT BURNING UPON THE ALTAR CONTINUALLY: IT SHALL NOT GO OUT.²⁴

Do those who so emphatically urge me to stick to the Bible mean that we should restore and reinstitute the sacrificial system, and place animals upon this altar of God—or will they agree with the rabbis that we must keep a perpetual light, a ner Tomid, burning continually to remind us of Israel's identification with what? sacrifices? ritual? forms? or, the light of truth, the light of morality, the light of justice, and the light of God?

Reference has been made to ADHERENCE TO JUDAISM. We say that Judaism achieved its noblest and most exalted expression through the teachings of the prophets. What do the prophets have to teach us about Judaism? We turn, then, to the Haftorah for this Sabbath, the 7th Chapter of Jeremiah who, speaking in the name of God, declared: FOR I SPOKE NOT UNTO YOUR FATHERS, NOR COMMANDED THEM IN THE DAY THAT I BROUGHT THEM OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT, CONCERNING BURNT-OFFERINGS OR SACRIFICES. BUT THIS THING I COMMANDED THEM SAYING: HEARKEN UNTO MY VOICE AND I WILL BE YOUR GOD, AND YE SHALL BE MY PEOPLE: AND WALK YE IN ALL THE WAY THAT I COMMAND YOU.²⁵

WHAT IS THE WAY that God has commanded us? The prophet clearly says that God does not want sacrifices, GOD WANTS OBEDIENCE OF HIS MORAL COMMANDMENTS. GOD WANTS JUSTICE. With passionate conviction, Jeremiah asserts that the moral laws have precedence over the ceremonial law – and to desert the way of justice, the way of decency, the way of morality is to betray our heritage and repudiate the covenant of Israel with God. What is prophetic Judaism if not a dedication to justice, and the implementation of the moral precepts of our faith?

“But that happened over 2500 years ago” it may be said. “Let’s be practical. Let’s be realistic. Is this the attitude of modern Judaism?” If anyone doubts the identity of modern Judaism with social justice, then let him study the life and the teachings of Isaac Mayer Wise, the founder of Reform Judaism in America, who declared: “ALL FORMS TO WHICH NO MEANING IS ATTACHED ANY LONGER ARE AN IMPEDIMENT TO OUR RELIGION, AND MUST BE DONE AWAY WITH.”²⁶ With prophetic fervor, Wise insisted that JUDAISM MUST DEVOTE ITSELF TO SOCIAL JUSTICE, THE RIGHTS OF THE OPPRESSED, THE CAUSE OF UNIVERSAL BROTHERHOOD AND TRUTH. With singleness of purpose and prophetic courage, Isaac Mayer Wise brushed off the attacks, the calumny, the villification [*sic*] of his opponents, and as a modern Jeremiah he taught that God does not delight in sacrifices or ceremonials, but in justice and righteousness and freedom.

“Stick to Reform Judaism, Rabbi!” Let me quote from the 8th point of the Pittsburg Platform of 1885, the platform of classic Reform Judaism: WE DEEM IT OUR DUTY TO PARTICIPATE IN THE GREAT TASK OF MODERN TIMES, TO SOLVE, ON THE BASIS OF JUSTICE AND RIGHTEOUSNESS, THE PROBLEMS PRESENTED BY THE CONTRASTS AND EVILS OF THE PRESENT ORGANIZATION OF SOCIETY.²⁷

Isn’t this Judaism? Isn’t this the teaching of Isaac Mayer Wise, who insisted that the disciples and devotees of Reform Judaism must be irrevocably committed to worship the God of freedom by serving the cause of freedom for men of every race and every faith.

With this as background—with the Torah, the prophets of Israel, the Rabbis, and the founders of Reform Judaism demanding that Israel must be the eternal light aflame with divinity, dedicated to freedom and justice for all men and all nations, we turn now to a consideration of the implications of the dynamiting of the Nashville Jewish Community Center.

You know the essential facts, and there is no need for me to reiterate the sordid story, the repercussion of threats, poison pen letters and promise of further violence. Permit me to digress with these words of acknowledgement. I am proud of my wife and my sons, who met threats of violence with courage and dignity;²⁸ I am proud of the leadership of our Jewish Community Center;

proud of our Board of Trustees; proud of our congregation and the attitude of calm and confidence manifested during these troubled weeks.

Now that we have had the time and calm to view these events in sober perspective, what was revealed? There were three points of view expressed by our Jewish community. Two points of view were extreme to the extent of hysteria, the third, the calm, courageous and dignified reaction of the majority.

What were the two extremes? The first insisted that what happened is undeniable proof that we are in golus, exile; that the community of Nashville is rampant with anti-Semitism; that America is no longer safe for those of the Jewish faith; that the Jews of America are doomed! I repudiate this extreme with all the conviction of my heart. I refused to listen to those who would have me protest over radio and television—who urged me to protest through newspapers and magazines—who insisted that I, in my capacity as a Rabbi, proclaim to the world that JEWS ARE IN DANGER. Quite to the contrary, when I was asked to appear on television it was my suggestion that the President of the Ministerial Association, the Chancellor of Vanderbilt University, and the Secretary of the Nashville Association of Churches speak and clearly demonstrate that this is NOT a Jewish problem, but a COMMUNITY PROBLEM—a problem of civil liberty, a problem of moral decency, a problem of law and order for the Church as well as the Synagogue, for Catholic and Protestant, as well as for those of the Jewish faith.

I also repudiate the other extreme of escapist jittery Jews, representing the counsel of timidity and silence. There were those who said—the word “Jewish” should never have been on that building—and that if it had been called the COMMUNITY CENTER, and NOT THE JEWSH COMMUNITY CENTER, the dynamiting would never have occurred.

There were those who said that the Center is responsible for what happened—and that the Center brought all the trouble upon itself, just as the Jews of Germany brought all the trouble upon themselves—and if the Center had maintained a segregationist point of view, refused to even consider the possibility of inter-racial meetings, the Center would not have been dynamited. I abhor this point of view as shallow and despicable.

This same extremist group further stated that I was responsible for the dynamiting of the Jewish Community Center—and that because of my pulpit utterances during the Holydays and my pro-integration stand in the community, all the Jews of Nashville have been and will continue to be endangered.

I say this, not with pride, but with a profound sense of shame, that with the exception of my sermons during the High Holydays last September, and one Parent Teachers Association address wherein I complied with a request to speak on the implications of the bombing of the Hattie Cotton School,²⁹ I have not made a single public utterance or statement on this subject of integration, and have not been as active in behalf of social justice as my faith demands.

“Why then” it was asked, “was the Center dynamited and the Temple threatened and not the YMCA or a Church? Doesn’t this prove we are our own worst enemies?” How naive can we be? Dr. John Rustin of the Belmont Methodist Church has spoken frequently on this subject and sponsored inter-racial meetings. Why wasn’t his church dynamited? The Westminster Presbyterian Church and other churches have sponsored inter-racial meetings within the past month—Why weren’t these churches dynamited? Peabody Graduate School, Vanderbilt Divinity School, Scarritt College have Negro students—why weren’t these schools bombed? The Catholic Church has integrated its parochial schools—why weren’t these schools bombed?

While we do not believe that Nashville is anti-Semitic, can we possibly conclude that anti-Semitism is not exploited by the racists and the segregationists in our community? Do we think that the hate groups throughout the nation have not concentrated upon Nashville—with the pattern and the line that the communist Jew forced the Supreme Court Decision in behalf of integration, that the communist Jew controls the Nashville Newspapers and the school board. On March 14th, two days before the dynamiting of our Jewish Community Center, the Anti-Defamation League issued a report stating that “hate publications from across the country had been distributed in Nashville to agitate the smouldering [*sic*] fires started by local individuals. These included such well-known anti-semitic sheets as Conde McGinley’s Common Sense which stated that “Jewish communist organizers from New York have been agitating and indoctrinating negroes in the South.”³⁰ A letter sent to W.A. Bass, Superintendent of Schools of Nashville, signed by M.B. Sherill of Florida “called for the establishment of groups of four to six to eight with bomb throwing and incendiary training.” Letters have been mailed from England from Israel Cohen asking for the mongrelization of races. There is no Israel Cohen. Do we think that we can have a John Kaspar in a community without a pouring forth of verbal venom against the Jews? Notice the plan and the pattern—wherever John Kaspar has incited against the Jews:³¹ Miami, Charlotte, N.C., Gastonia, N.C., and Nashville, there has been bombing and dynamiting of Jewish institutions.³² When will we learn with the authors of the book, the Authoritarian Personality,³³ that when you scratch a Negro hater, you find an anti-Semite, and a bigot dedicated to the destruction of the Catholic Church, civil liberties and the values of Christianity itself?

Whether we are silent, or we speak forth in behalf of decency, morality, law and order, the Jew will be attacked, because this has been the historic stereotype of anti-Semitism: —but is this to deter us from preserving the values and ideals that are sacred to Judaism? Does this mean that we must scuttle into caves of cowardice and pull the covers of silence over our conscience, because of bigots, goons and men of violence? Does this mean that we must tremble and cower

because we advocate, not only the teachings of our Jewish faith, but the basic principles of our American Heritage?

I, for one, refuse to yield to threats. I refuse, as a Rabbi and as an American citizen to surrender to intimidation and violence—and I am not alone. I have referred to two extremes, but I feel and I am confident that the vast majority of this congregation and of the Jewish community of Nashville shares the conviction that we must stand for decency, law, morality and social justice for those of every faith and every race—and not prostrate ourselves and crumble into whimpering, fear-ridden devotees of doom.

We are not alone, because there has been an outpouring of messages, letters, resolutions, from the clergy, from the Christian Church, from the decent, respected citizens of our community expressing shame, indignation, and a sense of outrage—but what is even more significant, the realization that this isn't a Jewish problem, but a Christian problem, a community problem, an attack upon Christian values as well as upon Jewish property. They know as well as we do, that the purpose of this violence is not to take human life, but to deter and frighten the community to prevent the integration of our public schools and frighten respectable leadership from supporting the decision of the Supreme Court.

AND NOW YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO ASK: WHERE DO WE STAND? AND WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Let me first speak for myself, as your Rabbi, and I believe that any spiritual leader who does not speak forth and lead his congregation on moral issues is not worthy of being the Rabbi of this or any other congregation, —and I speak clearly and without equivocation that all may understand: TOGETHER WITH THE CENTRAL CONFERENCE OF AMERICAN RABBIS³⁴ AND THE UNION OF AMERICAN HEBREW CONGREGATIONS,³⁵ I FAVOR INTEGRATION—not only because I am a Jew, not only because my religious faith teaches that God is our universal Father, that all men are brothers, created in the divine image; that all men regardless of their faith or their race are endowed by God with equal rights. I FAVOR INTEGRATION—not only because of an Amos who asked in the name of God: ARE YE NOT AS THE CHILDREN OF THE ETHIOPIANS UNTO ME, O CHILDREN OF ISRAEL;³⁶ not only because the Torah commands “JUSTICE, JUSTICE SHALL YE PURSUE;”³⁷ not only because of the religious heritage of Judaism that insists upon social justice for white and black, for brown, yellow and red—not only because I am a Jew, but because I am an American—and as an American I not only have the right, but the moral mandate to support the constitution, the bill of rights, the decision of the Supreme Court, and the laws of our nation.

It has been said that I am a nigger-lover. That is true! I love and I want God to help me love even more, Negroes and Caucasians, those of every race, every faith, every nationality—because to love one's fellowman is a moral

requirement of the Jewish faith, and to be a Jew is to despise prejudice and bigotry in every form.

Does this mean that I will embarrass my congregation? Does this mean that I urge you, my members, to undertake a rash, reckless, immoderate course of action in behalf of integration? No. I might yearn and hope with Moses when Eldad and Medad were reported prophesying [*sic*] in the camp: WOULD THAT ALL THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL WERE PROPHETS OF THE LORD³⁸—but as I stated in my letter to you,³⁹ as a southern congregation we need not initiate or take an overly conspicuous role in advocating integration—but we are not only a southern congregation, but we are a Jewish Congregation, and as a religious congregation dedicated to the principles of prophetic Judaism we are morally committed to join the law enforcement agencies, the Federal judiciary, the Christian clergy and church, and the citizens of our community in supporting decency, religious values, and the democratic rights of all the citizens of our nation. We want to do something; we want action? I urge the members of our congregation to join and support the Nashville Community Relations Conference,⁴⁰ a reputable, moderate organization that is concerned with much more than racial understanding, but with the immediate need to further harmonious and high-minded human relations. I urge my congregation to study Judaism and learn what Judaism has to teach about racial prejudice. As disciples of Isaac Mayer Wise, as proponents of prophetic Judaism, committed to love righteousness and morality, I urge my congregation to identify itself with the eternal law of God and not the transitory mores of a geographic area; I urge my congregation to believe that the Voice of Jacob is more powerful than the hands of modern Esau⁴¹ who kindled the fuse, or the explosive potential of dynamite.

We will not set our sights by the bigoted scum, the potential murderers, who would degrade man to the gutters of depravity and reduce him, degradate him to the level of savages,—but with abiding faith we lift our eyes to the psalmists and the prophets of Israel who would dignify, raise and elevate man to a status but little lower than the angels.⁴²

WE WILL NOT YIELD TO EVIL. We will not capitulate to fear. We will not surrender to violence. We will not submit to intimidation but, as Reform Jews, we will continue to speak for truth; we shall continue to dedicate ourselves to social justice and to the brotherhood of ALL men, knowing and believing that all men are created in the divine image, and this includes Negroes as well as Caucasians. And even as we stand at the threshold of Passover, our Festival of Freedom, the Season of liberation, with resolution and reverence, our hearts touched, warmed and ignited by the Eternal Flame of an eternal faith, we shall continue to consecrate ourselves to human rights, and civil liberties—we shall, with God's help, continue to dedicate ourselves to the cause of freedom and justice for all the children of man.

And so, in the words of the Haggadah, in the spirit of Passover, we pray, “May He who broke Pharaoh’s yoke forever shatter all fetters of oppression. Soon may He cause the glad tidings of redemption to be heard in all lands so that mankind, freed from violence and from wrong, and united in an eternal covenant of brotherhood, may celebrate the universal Passover in the name of our God of Freedom.”⁴³

AMEN.

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Notes

¹As cited in Rabbi Dov Katz, *Tenu’at HaMusar: toldoteha, isheha ve-shitoteha*, Vol. 1 (Tel Aviv: Bitan ha-Sefer, 1952), 308.

²Portions of the sermon are quoted in *The Intermountain Jewish News* (18 April 1958):16.

³See Mark K. Bauman and Berkley Kalin, eds., *The Quiet Voices. Southern Rabbis and Black Civil Rights, 1880’s to 1990’s* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1997), 17.

⁴*CCAR Yearbook* 55 (1946): 123–127. See also Roland B. Gittelsohn, “The Conference Stance on Social Justice and Civil Rights,” in *Retrospect and Prospect: Essays in Commemoration of the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the Founding of The Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1889–1964*, ed. Bertram W. Korn (New York: CCAR, 1965), 81–113.

⁵Among the important, recent publications examining the role of rabbis in the South, see *The Quiet Voices*. See also Melissa Fay Greene, *The Temple Bombing* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1996), 178ff; and P. Allen Krause, “Rabbis and Negro Rights in the South, 1954–1967,” *The American Jewish Archives Journal* XXI, no.1 (April 1969): 20ff.

⁶In the introductory essay to *The Quiet Voices*, Bauman cites several studies indicating this trend, including a significant work by Leonard Dinnerstein, *Uneasy at Home*. See Bauman and Kalin, 8.

⁷Bauman and Kalin, 18.

⁸*Duluth News Tribune* (4 July 1950), as cited in Frank J. Adler, *Roots in a Moving Stream: The Centennial History of Congregation B’nai Jehudah of Kansas City, 1870–1970* (Kansas City, MO: The Temple, Congregation B’nai Jehudah, 1972), 275.

⁹*Observer* (Anglo-Jewish weekly) (24 June 1960), as cited in Adler, 442.

¹⁰*Nashville Tennessean* (30 January and 10 February 1953), as cited in Adler, 442.

¹¹These reflections are taken from a document that, according to handwritten notes, Silverman prepared for Harry Golden, editor of *The Carolina Israelite*. No date is attached to the document. The notes are included in the American Jewish Archives collection of Silverman’s personal records, SC-15269-15271, Cincinnati, Ohio.

¹²Malachi 2:20.

¹³*Ibid.* See n. 10.

¹⁴Albert Vorspan, *Giants of Justice* (New York: UAHC, 1960), 190ff.

¹⁵May 1958, cited in Adler, 276.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 280f.

¹⁷Ibid., 301.

¹⁸*Basic Reform Judaism* (New York: Philosophical Press, 1970), 14, 171–172.

¹⁹One of the outstanding Jews in nineteenth century America, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise was the leading voice for a unified American Judaism. He arrived to the United States from Bohemia in 1846 and served congregations in Albany, New York, from 1846 to 1854. Wise went on to become the rabbi of B'nai Yeshurun in Cincinnati, where he spent the remainder of his years. His pioneering efforts led to the founding of three primary institutions of American Reform Jewish life: the Hebrew Union College (1875), the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC) (1873), and the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) (1889). He died on 26 March 1900, and the custom of commemorating his *yahrzeit* with a special memorial Sabbath service became widespread in American Reform congregations. Although in these instances Wise was being lauded, it was not for his particular views on slavery and social justice. For more see Alex J. Goldman, *Giants of Faith: Great American Rabbis* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1964), 64ff.

²⁰Words in capital letters preserve the format of the original sermon manuscript and likely indicate emphasis for rhetorical purposes in the oral presentation.

Silverman's personal papers now located in the American Jewish Archives do not contain written evidence of such indictments, but clearly from the tone of the entire sermon, he was under considerable pressure to defend both his position on integration and his decision to take a public stance on the issue. Interestingly, Silverman's papers include a strongly worded letter admonishing one of his rabbinical colleagues from a suburb of Chicago, who suggested in a sermon written shortly thereafter that "Southern Rabbis" should exercise greater caution in supporting integration, lest they bring harm upon their congregation. Silverman wrote: "You spoke with great certainty and conviction out of the depths of your own ignorance about the situation in the South...." The copy of this letter bears the hand-written note, "Not sent."

²¹The following are further recollections of Rabbi Silverman's regarding such threats from the document prepared for editor Golden:

March 17, 1958, Mrs. Silverman received a telephone call: "This is Captain Gordon of the Confederate Underground. We have just dynamited the Jewish Community Center. Next will be the Temple and any other nigger-loving place. We are going to shoot down Federal Judge William Miller in cold blood and next your husband." [Judge Miller was the federal district judge who presided over school desegregation cases in Nashville.]

A telephone call revealed that the Jewish Community Center had just been dynamited. Threatening calls continued to plague the rabbi. Terror by telephone persisted. Police converged upon The Temple and the Rabbi's home. A dead pigeon was put in his mailbox with a note: "You will haul away the dead pigeon. Next dead pigeon will be the nigger-loving Rabbi." Police continued to guard the rabbi's home as the threats multiplied. An anonymous call announced that the Temple would be dynamited that Friday evening and the caller urged the Jews to call off Worship Services. The rabbi insisted that services be held and an overflow crowd attended. Police surrounded the Temple.

Another telephone call threatened action against the children on Sunday morning and warned the Jews to keep their children at home. Rabbi Silverman said it was the right of any parent to keep his child at home, but he was sending his children to the Religious School. Over 300 children of the total enrollment of 400 attended. It was like a hakafof ceremony. Police cars separated by five feet cruised around the circular driveway protecting the children.

²²Three years earlier (1955), the UAHC had passed a comprehensive resolution on the appropriateness of the synagogue as an institution becoming involved in matters of social justice and communal concern. The "Statement of Basic Principles on the Synagogue and Social Action" made explicit reference to the essential, ethical ideals of the Biblical prophets. The resolution states: "Judaism insists that we must apply constantly the sharp ethical insights of the prophets to the specific social problems of our generation, as well as to the personal and individual problems of our lives."

²³Leviticus 6:2.

²⁴Leviticus 6:6.

²⁵Jeremiah 7:23.

²⁶*The Israelite* (1854), as cited in David Philipson, *The Reform Movement in Judaism* (reissue of the New and Revised Edition, New York, 1967), 343. We may safely assume that Silverman took this quote from an earlier edition of Philipson's history.

²⁷Although the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885 was never repudiated by the rabbis or the laity of American Reform, by this time, the CCAR had already adopted the newer 1937 statement of principles. Still, Rabbi Silverman chose to quote the earlier platform, particularly this statement as initiated by Emil Hirsch, perhaps because it expressed in terse language the essence of his argument here.

²⁸Also from Silverman's recollections to Golden:

Another telephone call to the rabbi stated: 'We know that your oldest son goes to Hillsboro High School and gets out at 2:30. We know the bus he takes and his route home. Your youngest son goes to Palmer School. He gets out at 3 o'clock. Keep those kids at home, Jew-Rabbi. We won't kill them. We'll just maim them for life as a sign of what happens to nigger lovers.' Rabbi Silverman was sworn in as a deputy sheriff, purchased a snub-nosed .38 revolver, took daily target practice, and carrying a gun for the protection of his family, he took his children to school and picked them up. They never missed a day of school.

²⁹In the early 1950s, the progress toward school integration in Nashville, as mandated by the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court ruling, had been slow but steady. The battles between the integrationists and opposition groups such as the White Citizens' Council featured taunts and threats directed at children, armed National Guardsmen in the schools, and a series of violent bombings. Here, Silverman makes reference to the near destruction of a new elementary school, the Hattie Cotton School that had been dynamited on the morning of 10 September 1957, targeted in response to the enrollment of a six-year-old black girl the previous day.

³⁰McGinley blended anticommunism with antisemitism in his semimonthly paper, couched as a patriotic press, which he produced from his print shop in Unionville, New York. His print orders averaged around 50,000 copies and at times exceeded 100,000. His publications highlighted fictionalized accounts of Jewish plots to control the United States. Typical headlines were "Jewish Leaders Are Crazy for Power," "Zionists Threaten Russia with War," "Brotherhood—Jew Trap for Christianity," and "Invisible Government Rules Both Parties—Adlai and Ike Marxist Stooges." See James Rorty, "Storm Over The Investigating Committees. The Charges Against Them and The Record," *Commentary* 19, no. 2 (February 1955): 128ff.

³¹Kaspar was arrested by Nashville police following the bombing of the Hattie Cotton school. See Murray Kempton, "America Comes of Middle Age" in *Voices in Our Blood. America's Best on the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Jon Meacham (New York: Random House, 2001), 113–117.

³²In her book detailing the events surrounding the October 1958 bombing of The Temple in Atlanta, Melissa Faye Greene notes that in the twelve months prior to that bombing, "eleven sticks of dynamite were found at a temple in Charlotte; a synagogue in Miami and the Nashville Jewish Center were bombed on the same day; undetonated dynamite was found at a temple in Gastonia, North Carolina; a Jacksonville, Florida synagogue was dynamited, and dynamite with a burnt-out fuse was found at Temple Beth-El in Birmingham, Alabama on the same day. The simultaneity of some of the bombings hinted at southwide organization of the terrorism." Greene, *The Temple Bombing*, 6.

³³Theodor Adorno, et al., *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1950). This book was part of a series called Studies in Prejudice, sponsored by the American Jewish Committee as part of an effort to produce basic research on religious and racial prejudice, especially, but not only, antisemitism. *The Authoritarian Personality* examined the connection between deep-rooted personality traits and prejudice. The studies examined and described certain personality traits that lead to prejudice and racism, including excessive conformity

and submissiveness to authority, intolerance, insecurity, superstition, and ridged, stereotyped thought patterns.

³⁴The resolution of the CCAR states: “The Central Conference of American Rabbis views with satisfaction the historic decision of the United States Supreme Court which outlaws segregation in the field of public education. We hail this ruling as a profound victory of our prophetic tradition and as eloquent expression of the faith of all Americans in the basic justice of our democratic system. We call upon our colleagues and the congregations they serve to assist in the swift and harmonious implementation of this decision which reaffirms America’s position as leader in the free world.” *CCAR Yearbook* (1954): 106.

³⁵“Having consistently opposed every form of discrimination because of our fundamental belief in the equality of all men under God, we rejoice in the unanimous decision of the United States Supreme Court in the school segregation cases. We regard this decision as a major chapter in the history of the growth of true equality under the law. As proponents of Judaism, which first enunciated the concept of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, we pledge ourselves to do all within our power to make this decision of the highest court in the land meaningful in our respective communities. We, therefore, urge our congregants and congregations in all sections of the country to join with forward-looking racial, religious and civic groups in the community in using their influence to secure acceptance and implementation of the desegregation decisions in every community in our land.” UAHC 43rd General Assembly (Los Angeles: February 1955).

³⁶Amos 9:7.

³⁷Deuteronomy 16:20.

³⁸Numbers 11:29.

³⁹The letter addressed “TO THE MEMBERS OF MY CONGREGATION” is dated 21 March 1958. In it, Silverman relates to his congregants the outpouring of support and expressions of outrage that had come to the Jewish community by way of messages, telegrams, and resolutions from the governor, ministerial associations, ministers, churches, civic groups, and citizens of the community. He also reminds his members to remain steadfast against the threats of violence and intimidation. This previously unpublished letter is included among the rabbi’s personal records at the AJA.

⁴⁰Silverman had taken a leadership role in the formation of this conference, which was gathered expressly to promote a peaceful process leading to full integration.

⁴¹Genesis 27:22: “The voice is the voice of Jacob, yet the hands are the hands of Esau.” In the interpretive tradition of Midrash, “the hands of Esau” became symbolic of human shallowness, violence, and pain, evident in the oppressors of the Jewish people. “The voice of Jacob” represented Jewish learning, compassion, and love. See *Genesis Rabbah* 65:20.

⁴²Psalms 8:5.

⁴³*Union Haggadah* (New York: CCAR, 1923), 78.